

“The creation waits with eager longing”

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24 and Romans 8:12-25

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Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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¹² So then, brothers and sisters,^[1] we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba!^[m] Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness^[n] with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in^[o] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes^[p] for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I hope someone here – in the last few weeks – has taken the time to read Romans 7 and 8. Those are the chapters we have been reading and talking about these last few weeks, two chapters at the very center of our faith. It would be hard to think of two more important chapters in all of scripture.

As you will see, if you do that simple exercise, there is so much there, so much we could reflect on, so much we could talk about and apply to our lives.

Sam read the verses that I would be reading for today to figure out what to say to the children this morning, and he came away with a completely different insight and truth than the one I decided to preach about. The insight that we are growing up in faith is a very fine insight, but it's not the one that stood out for me.

The longer I lived with this text, the longer I reflected on it, the more convinced I became that the text is teaching us something about prayer – and not just prayer, but about our relationship with God, which we discover when we pray. Prayer can be window into our relationship with God.

As a pastor I sometimes feel like a professional pray-er. I am often the one people turn to for a prayer – either at meal time or at a special occasion. I was surprised at the beginning of my ministry when people asked, but I am no longer surprised to hear someone say, **“Doug, would you pray?”**

Not because I'm especially good at it, but because it's my calling or vocation.

At my mother's 90th birthday party a couple of months ago, with the whole family sitting down to eat at a fancy hotel, she suddenly turned to me and said, **“Doug, would you say the blessing?”**

Well, ordinarily, I like to think a little about what I'm going to say – before I say it – especially if there's a large crowd of people, but when your 90 year old mother asks you to pray at her birthday party, you do not say, **“Let me think about it, mom.”**

And because I do so much praying – publicly and privately – I am always delighted when I am not asked, when someone says, **“Doug, why don't you take the night off. I will offer the prayer.”** And then, of course, I almost always hear some wonderful prayers, deeply touching and moving prayers.

I served a church one time where one of the members was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Everyone knew this man. He was our local celebrity. And we were proud, of course, that on Sundays he would be sitting in our church with his wife and daughters.

He also taught in Sunday School every week, by the way, 10 or 11 year olds. So, he was committed. And the rest of us realized that, if he had time to worship and to teach Sunday School, maybe the rest of us could find the time to participate in church life as well.

Anyway, Larry – that was his name – was never afraid to pray. I officiated at his daughter's wedding and prayed at the wedding reception afterward, but other than that Larry prayed. If you are the CEO of a large corporation, you do not shirk your responsibility – financially, spiritually, or in any other way.

And Larry could pray like no one else I have ever heard. When he prayed, you felt as though you were in a high-level meeting. And it was all business. A lot was at stake. Very serious. And it always sounded to me as though Larry was addressing the chairperson of the meeting, the largest shareholder, the one who made the ultimate decisions. There was never any doubt about who was in charge when he prayed. And it wasn't Larry.

This was his prayer language and his prayer style. I don't like those words very much, but you know what I mean. And everyone, as you can imagine, listened very carefully when he prayed.

That's not my prayer language or my prayer style. My experience with the corporate world, after all, is very limited. But I wondered how someone would describe my prayer language and my prayer style. How would you describe your own prayer life? If someone were to listen to you over a period of time, as we used to listen to Larry, what would they say? What conclusions would they draw from listening to you?

My daughters, when they were growing up, would tease me about ... well, about most things. The way I dressed, the way I talked, you name it. Daughters keep their fathers humble. When a church member would call our home in the evening, my daughters used to tease me that my voice changed. They said I had a ministerial voice. And to them it sounded fake, not authentic, not the way I talked to them.

And it was a good reminder – after I stopped being irritated that they would tease about the way I talked on the phone – it was a good reminder that I needed to be authentic, the same person, no matter who I was talking to. And I think that's true for our prayer lives as well.

If your life is anything at all like mine, you go through periods or stages of life, chapters maybe, and there are always periods or stages where I feel needy and desperate and pathetic, so my prayer life at those times sounds like begging. **“Please, God, do this. Please, God, do that. And oh, if you have time, O God, do this other thing as well.”**

Over the years, I have had many periods or stages where my prayers were begging prayers. Not pretty, but authentic.

But, and I am happy to say this, there have been other times in my life, this is one of them, when my prayers have been all about gratitude. **“Thank you, God, for the gift of life. Thank you that I have air in my lungs. Thank you that I was able to get out of bed this morning. Thank you that I could do something as amazing as walking to the train in the morning.”**

And then (and of course there are many variations on all of this), there have also been those times when my prayers were not really prayers at all. There have been times when I was mostly quiet, when I didn't know what to say, when I didn't know what to pray for, when my words seemed so inadequate.

I would open my mouth, and the words would not be there.

When something terrible or horrific happens in the world, when there is a mass shooting in the U.S. or a terrorist bombing somewhere in Europe, when I read about the latest famine in Africa, I am often not sure what to say. Words fail me.

And as a preacher and a writer, I love words, and I am proud of my words, too proud often, but sometimes my words disappear when I need them most.

In those situations, even if I can think of words to say, the words that come to mind never seem adequate to the task. Sometimes I've said everything I know to say, and then I just shut down. I am exhausted. And I think God is probably exhausted from listening to me. He has heard it all before, and it's so uninteresting.

He must think, **“Doug, is that the best you have?”**

And it is that kind of situation that I think Paul had in mind when he wrote the verses we heard today. There are times, Paul seems to say, when the Spirit intercedes for us, when the Spirit **“bears witness,”** as our translation puts it, when the Spirit helps us in our weakness, when the Spirit gives us the language we can’t find on our own.

You know, it’s important to see that sometimes this language is not a real language at all. No grammar or syntax, but instead what Paul calls **“groaning.”** If you grew up in a Pentecostal tradition, then you may be way ahead of us here. You’ve experienced this and know what it means. If you grew up in the kind of church I did, where prayers require words and good grammar and a beginning, middle, and end, then this kind of prayer is going to be very difficult.

What Paul is saying, I think, is that we give over our spirit to God’s Spirit. We let the Spirit do its job in us. We let the Spirit say what we are no longer capable of saying. And then what comes out of us are – these are Paul’s words – **“sighs too deep for words.”**

Well, you might say, what is that? **“Sighs too deep for words.”** That’s nonsense.

And if you are rational thinker, if you are a scientist, someone who values clear thinking, then – yes – this language will sound like nonsense. But please remember that Paul is no academic slouch. He certainly ranked as one of the better educated people of his time. So, be careful if you are tempted to dismiss him and the words here too quickly. He is grasping for an important truth.

Throughout the Bible there are these places where people are overcome with emotion, where words aren’t even necessary, where the pain and suffering are expressed physically.

One of those places is in Exodus 3, where God says to Moses that he [God!] has seen the suffering of his people in Egypt and he has heard their cry. Maybe these were prayers offered aloud, but what God is referring to is something deeper, a pain that cannot be expressed. All God to do was to look at them, and he could see their distress, he could feel their turmoil, and he knew that something had to be done.

And then, one of my personal favorites, because it’s such a wonderful glimpse of Jesus’ humanity, is found in John chapter 11. Jesus has received word that his friend Lazarus is gravely ill, and by the time he reaches Bethany, where Lazarus lived with his sisters Mary and Martha, Lazarus has died. And when Jesus receives this news, and when he sees Mary weeping at his feet, the story says that Jesus **“was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”**

Well, as every first-year New Testament Greek student knows, that’s a terrible translation. What happens to Jesus in this verses is that he convulses with pain. His entire body reacts to the news. I can imagine his shoulders heaving, his legs giving out beneath him, his head spinning. This is what awful news does to us. We feel faint. We need to sit down.

And then the shortest verse in all of scripture occurs here. **“Jesus wept.”** Almost unnecessary, when you think about it. Of course he wept as well.

But you see no words are necessary. Everyone who was there that day could see what was happening. Some of them said, **“Do you see how much he loved him,”** meaning how much Jesus loved Lazarus.

I am guessing – I don’t know of course – but I am guessing that all of us have had these moments. Someone close to us dies, and the news is unexpected. A job unexpectedly comes to an end. A marriage ends. Disappointment comes. Whatever it is, we react physically.

There is an Irish or Gaelic word “to keen,” and keening is what mourners do at funerals or when there is news of death. And I think it’s such a good word, and it’s one of those words that sounds like the thing itself. When people are keening, there is a pain being expressed that is too deep for words.

Well, as interesting and familiar as all of this is, I don’t want to leave you there.

Frankly, it’s surprising that, in a chapter as full of hope as Romans 8, Paul would spend so much time talking about suffering. And in case you were not aware, Romans 8 is the most reassuring chapter in all of scripture. This is where we find a resounding confirmation that “there is no condemnation,” that “if God is for us, who can be against us,” that “in all these things we are more than conquerors.”

I mean, if you want the language of victory in life, go to Romans chapter 8. So...why all of this talk about suffering and groaning.

Here is the wonderful insight that I want to leave you with today. And this is an insight I don’t think I had ever seen before. It happens every time I study a text. One more time that text yields something fresh and new and exciting.

And here it is. It is our faith – this confident hope that we carry around with us – that causes us to feel suffering. And that may sound odd, so let me say it differently. If we weren’t confident of a final victory over sin and death, if we weren’t absolutely sure that God was going to win in the end, then we would never feel all of these setbacks in life so deeply.

The pain in our world, the pain in our own lives, is magnified because we know that God does not intend this for us. We know that God has something far more, far better, in mind for us. We know that this “present suffering,” as Paul puts it, will one day be gone for good.

So, in a strange and unexpected way, our faith magnifies the pain we feel. It’s not right. The injustices in the world are not right. When a person close to us dies, it’s not right. When we are cheated or taken advantage of or we are treated as though we are less than human, it’s not the way God intends the world to be.

But it is our faith in a final victory that allows us to feel the outrage and the disgust and the longing for something better.

I want to leave something with you today. We started by talking about prayer, and we ended by acknowledging that not all prayer has words or even needs words. I want to leave you with a question about your prayer life.

Not “do you pray?” but “what are you praying for?” What is it that gives your prayers shape and hope and meaning? I think that what Paul suggests here, in these words, is that we begin to pray for this ultimate conclusion, for the time when all things will be made new, for the final victory.

That should be the common denominator of all our prayers.

³⁵ Who will separate us [Paul writes at the end of chapter 8] who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now, there’s something to pray for.

Please pray with me. We thank you that when words fail us, when we no longer know what to say, that your Spirit prays for us, that your Spirit intercedes for us. God, we pray that you will pray in and through us now. Keep before us the vision of the final victory, the time when sin and death will disappear, the time when your Lordship will be clear to all. We pray this, full of hope and trust and longing, in Jesus’ name. Amen.